

6.8 Beware Of Spiritual Ego

Resist the urge to treat spirituality as a competition.

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When we embark on a path of spiritual inquiry, our default attitude is to approach this process with the same goal-oriented mindset we are used to applying in other areas of our lives. This can twist spirituality into something we excel at, potentially obscuring the reasons why we began this journey in the first place.

For example, we may set the goal of reaching a state of enlightenment or compare ourselves with friends and seek to be more spiritual than them—whatever that means—perhaps as an attempt to win the approval of a respected teacher or parent.

This type of competitive spirituality can prevent us from realizing the principles of our chosen path, as, ironically, can its opposite—abandoning or attempting to kill the ego. The solution lies somewhere in the middle—true enlightenment is found in the acceptance of all things, including the ego.

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- Focusing on yourself is more effective than making comparisons with others.
- Breaking the spell cast by the goal-oriented mind can propel us into deeper self-realization.
- Recognizing the ego-driven nature of too much spiritual searching releases us from the need to be perfect, which can free up a lot of energy and reduce stress.

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- Modern society tends to engage our goal-oriented mind, so letting go of this mindset can feel very unfamiliar.
- This concept can easily be misinterpreted to suggest that there's no point in making any spiritual effort or trying to do anything at all.

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When we take an interest in spirituality, the role of the ego becomes particularly thorny. Some of us pursue spiritual objectives with an ego-driven zeal, betraying an underlying desire to somehow become the best or the most spiritual.

At the other end of the scale, we may be tempted to try to remove ego from our lives entirely, which is a form of spiritual bypassing. When this takes hold, we may seek to prove how little ego we have, an impulse that ironically emerges from the ego. Or, we may lose the drive that pushes us toward accomplishments, concluding that this drive is an expression of the ego and, therefore, invalid.

At the heart of this perspective is a paradox. The ego drives us to act in the world, earn money, achieve goals, improve, and become something. If we subscribe to the viewpoint that we should not do any of these things in order to reach a higher level of spiritual attainment, then we are denying a part of our existence. It's likely that the ego will emerge in other ways, such as via a competition to

be more spiritual than others.

Enlightened masters teach us that a true spiritual path lies somewhere in the middle—accepting the wiles of the ego, yet not holding onto them too tightly. A famous quote attributed to the Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki Roshi asserts that “enlightenment is an accident, but spiritual practice makes us accident-prone.” In other words, we cannot become enlightened through mere striving, but certain practices increase the chances of seeing through the illusions of this world and perceiving immortal truths.

The key to breaking through the paradox of spiritual ego is acceptance. Spiritual practices such as meditation and contemplation can be an important way to cultivate acceptance, as long as they are focused not on being better than others but on being okay with where we are. An entirely ego-driven existence, for example, trying to find meaning and purpose in life by chasing after money, material goods, or sexual partners, is unlikely to bring true fulfillment. On the other hand, suppressing the desire for a successful career and the attainment of challenging goals can leave us feeling equally empty. The middle path—accepting our human needs and desires—is the route to peace and balance.

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1. “ARJ Barker, Sickest Buddhist”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pbzs_5gD2DM
 2. “Trying Is The First Step Towards Failure. Wise Advice on Trying Something”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhrEzA3SEBU>
 3. “What Is a Spiritual Ego?": <https://selfmasteryandbeyond.com/blog/what-is-a-spiritual-ego/>
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